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ABSTRACT

This booklet, directed to parents, advocates parent involvement in New Zealand playcenter groups, discusses parental duties in the playcenter, and suggests ways parents can help children to learn. The booklet has three chapters. Chapter I discusses the value of parent involvement from the point of view of the child, the parent, and the community. Such involvement is said to provide children with a secure link between the home and the school and encourage parents' interests and understanding without diminishing their responsibility. Chapter II outlines duties expected of parents involved in playcenters, describes how parents should behave at home and in the playcenter, suggests topics for discussion at adult playcenter meetings, and includes samples of what parents should and should not say when speaking to children. Chapter III provides information on types of children's behavior that need extra consideration in playcenter work (e.g., aggressiveness, swearing, hitting), causes of such behavior, and ways to deal with it. (CM)

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Early Childhood Education

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT

IN

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Gwen Somerset

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT

IN

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

I. The Value of Parent Involvement.

II. Your Day on Duty in a Playcentre.

III. Helping Children to Learn.

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I. THE VALUE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

As playcentre parents we believe that a nation's greatest asset is its children, and that the learning of the early years must involve the parents.

A Child's Home is his First World

When a baby is born his family becomes his world. His parents, brothers and sisters become his teachers. From them he learns a language. The whole family delights in every advance made and encourages independence and skill.

But most important of all, the family teaches the baby what is perhaps the most important lesson of his whole life – how to love by being loved!

A child who feels he is not loved tends to become a deprived child who sees himself or herself as a person of little value or worth. This will affect his achievements and friendships.

The home of the child may include aunts, uncles or grandparents. His father's friends may help fix the car, and mother's friends provide playmates, and all help the toddler to feel at home in a friendly world.

But he or she may be a first or only child in an isolated district. The child may not see other children or adults. The mother may feel cut off from her former workmates and her loneliness become unbearable. She may even resent the constant care needed by her child. A return to work is one escape route. But she needs to give careful thought as to

whether she will really benefit the two persons most concerned – her child and herself.

The New World of Playcentre Joins the Home

Any child under the age of six years may be admitted to a playcentre group so long as the parent or parent substitute is prepared to attend with the child.

If the child is under the age of two and a half years the parent must attend every session. Should the child be over two and a half years the parent attends until the child has become happy in the new surroundings. Every parent (mother or father) takes turns in sharing supervision and responsibility for the progress of the whole group.

Thus the young child enters his or her first world of school with a parent alongside as friend and schoolmate. There is a firm and reliable link with home although there may be new faces, new places and new playthings. The toddler feels able to venture and explore freely when his parents understand and approve of what he is doing at playcentre and are just as interested as they are at home.

The playcentre therefore extends the home; it does not replace it. It joins the parents; it does not exclude them. It encourages their interest; it does not diminish their responsibility. It increases their understanding; it does not lessen their roles as parents and teachers.

To a child this sharing of play experience is evidence of love and acceptance. The making of things together, the solving of puzzles, reading or singing, all encourage friendliness and reinforce love between parent and child.

Because his or her parents keep in touch and retain their interest, the child has little difficulty in making new friends and in attempting new levels in learning.

Later Days of School

If we are parents of older children, we may be familiar with the school situation where children have to adapt to two worlds, *the world of home,* and *the world of school.*

The values, standards and even the language may be different in these two worlds, and the school child quickly discovers that somehow he or she is expected to fit into both.

The result is that the school child may never feel completely at home in either world. In his desire to please both parents and teachers he may have to reject one world. He shows a different face to each.

We realise that in many schools of today, the need is seen of involving parents. The unfortunate fact is, however, that the "average" parent has an ingrained fear of the "trained" teacher, while the teacher may not be able to meet the challenge of a parent's interest and concern.

The Involvement in Playcentre is Different

Parent involvement in playcentre avoids this two-faced approach.

Firstly, there is no fear by parents of the "trained" expert, since *any parent may become a supervisor* (or teacher) if prepared to study for a playcentre certificate. There is thus a friendly equality among the adults since all are considered as possible supervisors or leaders and all equally responsible for the conduct and standards of the group.

There are no degrees of importance when the supervisor is truly "one of us". This makes for an informal, club-like feeling in the playcentre where parents can air their worries as well as their ideas, and gain from each other's experience.

Again, parents are encouraged and helped to extend their understanding of children and family life through talks, discussions, films and reading.

Thus the playcentre erects no fence in the path of a parent who wishes to become qualified as a supervisor. Any parent, mother or father, grandmother or grandfather, is welcomed as a learner with the children and as a leader at any level in the movement.

The Feed-back from Playcentre to Home

The whole family benefits when parents continue to be involved and interested in their children's education. Parents are their first teachers and they need never abdicate.

One important outcome of parent involvement is that playcentre ways and practices become freely and happily adopted in the home. Thus there is consistency in what is expected of the child. He or she does not have to adapt to two different worlds.

Other Benefits Are:

When play as learning is understood, a child makes all round progress and is an "easier" child.

Because parents are interested a child feels loved and encouraged.

Support is given to those parents who may feel unsure, inadequate or anxious.

Isolated parents find new friends and interests, and gain more confidence in the role of parenthood.

They enjoy their fast growing children.

Parents discover unsuspected talents in themselves, becoming more creative and adequate as people, not only as parents. Their happiness reflects on the whole family.

Parent Involvement and the Community

The local playcentre can become a common meeting place for young parents with similar interests, where an important and useful job is being done in their community.

Here parents learn to organise, finance and develop an important section of local education – some would say the most important section. They take pride in their efforts and success. They become more competent in leadership, and learn to know their community better as they take a share in providing for its many needs. We hear of playcentres becoming the focal point for lectures in continuing education – drama, art, human relationships and other studies. This is but a natural result of parents becoming aware of their own educational needs through their involvement in the educational needs of their children.

The Parents' Role at Playcentre

On entering a playcentre for the first time, much may be unfamiliar to new parents. They see children handling tools with ease, using water freely, painting with many colours, cutting with scissors or pretending to be bulldozers or cooks. We all learn by doing and parents soon find practical answers to practical problems. They soon discover new ways of helping children to climb to the next level in their development by –

- watching what they do
- listening to their talk
- talking to them
- sharing their play, or
- suggesting other ways of solving problems.

But there will also be many questions such as –

How do young children learn through play?

Is a parent's interest necessary?

Can a parent improve a child's ability to learn?

Does playcentre learning help school learning?

It is impossible for a supervisor to answer all such questions while a busy session gets under way. Yet it is important for all to understand what is being attempted. Therefore parents are expected to attend **introductory talks** before they become members. Talking things over makes sense when taking on a new job

The Working Mother or Solo Parent

Playcentres try to be flexible and provide whatever help is possible to mothers who are obliged to work outside the home while their children are still young.

The following alternative methods of involvement have been used –

Solo parents form a group and arrange a roster, or arrange for substitute parents from the playcentre;

parent attends special Saturday sessions;

parent arranges glide time with employer;

parent attends evening talks and helps with equipment and committees.

As it is the parent's show of interest in her child that is vital, any choice that involves her personally will add to her child's feeling of acceptance.

Involvement of Fathers and Family

As a mother, the need for agreement between wife and husband, especially with regard to the children, will be understood.

Since fathers are usually at work, their involvement is mainly a step removed, but no less important. The wife can keep him informed and in touch, and this doubles the value of what she alone could do for her children's progress.

Some practical ways include –

talking together about playcentre, how it helps learning, and why his interest is needed;
showing him child's work;
asking him to read booklets, attend talks, films or meetings;
inviting his help on committees, making or selecting equipment and attending special father sessions.

The help of grandparents adds considerably to the work value of a playcentre, especially if retired and willing to use their talents or skills to benefit young children's learning.

Acceptance of Playcentre

Acceptance will depend on how fully you appreciate what is being attempted. You will remember that a child belongs in a family, and spends most of his time there. Very little can be of lasting value to him unless the family supports what is being learned.

If you cannot honestly believe in what you find at playcentre or in your value as a helper, then it is necessary to talk things over more thoroughly. A negative attitude will prevent both you and your child from gaining full benefit from the experience. If your day on duty is only a chore, you do not help in your child's education, nor enjoy learning yourself.

II. YOUR DAY ON DUTY IN A PLAYCENTRE

We place great confidence in our playcentre parents, knowing you will not let down the supervisor or other parents, but will give willing and cheerful help to everyone and be friendly and neighbourly. Should you be prevented from taking your duty day, you ring the Roster Secretary and arrange for a substitute. This is your responsibility, as the supervisor depends on you for a satisfactory session.

Sometimes quite trivial happenings at home may be upsetting. If you plan simple meals on duty day, you should be able to look forward to it as a happy outing.

You need to arrive a quarter of an hour before the session begins, so that there is time to place everything in position before the centre is due to open. It is important that you do arrive at the time decided upon. The Roster Officer will have arranged to have an experienced mother on duty with you for your first days.

Firstly, settle your own child to play. Take time, even if it keeps you from other jobs. If he hangs around you, give him quietly the attention he needs without feeling worried about it, and play with him, possibly with some material similar to what he uses at home.

Every playcentre has its own special duties which the supervisor will explain to you.

You will realise that some of these have to be done before the children arrive, e.g. equipment has to be set out correctly, and paint, dough, etc., mixed, the notice board and parents' corner arranged, toilets and exits checked.

The supervisor allots special duties to you. If you prefer certain ones on any day you should discuss them with her. In general, your time is arranged with an equal allotment of kitchen duties and supervision. You should be prepared to –

Go where the Supervisor asks you,
and stay until relieved

Station yourself so that you can work with a group and also see a wide area.

Observe children who are not settled and help them into play.

Help any child who needs help at toileting.

When corners are disordered, tidy them.

Sharing in Play

The supervisor has planned for the play of 20–30 young children, but a good session depends on the co-operation of the helpers as well as on good planning.

Each parent helper is prepared to work with the children
at playcentre.

She is prepared to answer questions, to talk with those who are interested in any special object, idea or theme, to sing with small groups and to tell stories.

As well, she uses clay, dough or finger paint and helps with carpentry or cutting and pasting, etc. She is interested in block play and junk play and, in general, shares in the play, but without directing it or imposing her adult ideas or standards of work.

Adults Facilitate Learning

Adults encourage children to play freely with what they choose for themselves, and allow them to finish what they begin even if it takes the whole session. Nor is there any set time for different kinds of occupation.

Adults remember that
a playcentre is a children's workshop.
Their learning includes experiences
of touching, seeing, listening, and
the development of body, hands, eyes, fingers,
of friendships, feelings and imagination;
all leading to an understanding of themselves
and others, of what the world is like, and
of how things live and work.

Speaking to Children

In giving directions, say little, and say it slowly, firmly, clearly and with friendliness. When you are speaking to other people's children, this is specially important as they are not used to your voice. If a child does not understand, repeat the same words slowly; do not add anything more.

Your voice should be pitched low and you should help out your words with actions that show your meaning. In speaking to a child, do not call to him across the room; go up close to him and use his name. Be sure he is listening before you start speaking to him.

A Few Samples of What to Say –

"YOU DO FEEL ANGRY, DON'T YOU. I FEEL LIKE THAT TOO SOMETIMES," not "You are a naughty boy, you mustn't lose your temper."

"HAD AN ACCIDENT? NEVER MIND, LET'S WIPE IT UP" – not "You are careless (stupid, dirty, untidy)."

'WE'LL BOTH PICK UP THESE PEGS." – not "Hurry and pick up all those pegs."

Make it clear to children whether you are giving a direction or offering a choice. If you wish a child, e.g. to put her jersey on, say "IT IS COLDER NOW, I THINK YOU NEED YOUR JERSEY ON." not "Would you like your jersey on?"

Help a child's initiative by encouraging him to try things.

"WHY DON'T YOU TRY AND FIND OUT HOW IT WORKS?" not "Let me show you how to do it."

Children will ask questions freely, especially when investigating something new.

Try to give them simple and correct answers and treat all questions seriously.

Making Friends

You meet people at playcentre who have interests similar to your own and you make many friends. Of course you will wish to talk to them and are expected to do so, but, if you can, avoid talking to another adult over the heads of playing children. If you do, they usually leave their play and look for another activity often because their own exchange of feelings or ideas has been interrupted.

The supervisor is an ordinary member of the centre like yourself and should not be regarded as a paid employee which, strictly speaking, she is not. She is dependent on every parent in keeping up standards and in providing adequate supervision in the playcentre. Other helpers and committee members are neighbours who have similar problems to your own and appreciate friendliness and warmth from you, just as the supervisor does.

Relax, But be Positive and Alert

A calm, relaxed attitude is the one aimed at by all good supervisors. If you feel a little anxious, try to overcome it by moving quietly and more slowly than usual. Relax the muscles of your face by smiling; avoid quick and sudden movements of the head or hands. Wear low heels that will help you to walk quietly and easily. Avoid hurry. If there are bumps and bangs you will not get startled if relaxed; if there is crying or crashing you will have something in reserve.

It is necessary for you to learn to feel and appear relaxed, but at the same time to train your mind and eye to rove over the whole scene and act positively when your help is needed.

It is not necessary to dominate the playroom with your personality and voice, nor is it a good practice to rush about disturbing play by noise and haste. To be there when you are needed, and to appear on the spot at the right time are qualities valued in an assistant.

Try to get down to the child's level by sitting low, on a small chair or on the floor: avoid standing high above him or bending to his level for a second or two. Walk up close to a group (or an individual) in a quiet manner so that they feel a trust in your presence. Use a steadying hand on a child's shoulder or arm and smile in a friendly way if he needs assistance. Admit hurts and do not disparage or laugh at them. Always be sympathetic and helpful.

At the End of the Session –

Most centres are obliged to pack away their entire equipment. This is an important part of the routine of the session. You will appreciate why equipment must be stored correctly, speedily and with care to avoid losses and breakages. A careless helper can spoil equipment more easily than a child can. As a member of the playcentre it is your property.

If adequate and easily accessible storage has been provided, packing away should not take more than 15–20 minutes.

Most of the packing away falls on the helpers as the supervisor is busy with the mothers and children at this time. Begin with material in which there seems no interest.

Avoid beginning to pack away too early,
thus cutting down the full play session.

The supervisor will give you directions as to the special "end of session" jobs to be done at your playcentre. As well as packing away equipment, they include helping children with their belongings and leaving the premises in good order.

If children are still present when the space is cleared, one mother is required to work with them, rather than allow confusion at the end of the session. If adults do not share clearing away jobs or are noisy or flurried over doing them, a session will not end well.

When You Arrive Home

Try to attend to your child's needs first just as you did when you arrived at the centre – food, toilet, occupation – before you hurry along with your own chores. Later, talk about playcentre, what you did, what you liked, what other children did. This will encourage your Ann or John to recall what she or he did too. This recall is important as it helps language and learning. It is wise to make any questions particular, not general. If, for instance, father says, "What did you do today?" the answer is often "Oh, lots," or "Nothing," but if he says "What colour was the dough today?" or "What did you buy when you went shopping with your dolls?" Ann will be able to concentrate on a special item and give a clear answer. Father will enjoy hearing the news.

Tomorrow there is no playcentre, but there is work at home for mother and child to enjoy together – one reason for not having playcentre every day. Ann or John can "help" you with cooking, dusting, shopping, carrying etc. and you help them to learn about yourself by including them in your day-to-day work and life. Many of the activities of playcentre will be possible and you will double the value of play as learning if you can provide as much as you are able at home.

Keeping in Touch with Your Playcentre

If for any reason parents do not have the opportunity for frequent contact with their children's work, the very essence of playcentre, its "working together and learning together" aspect is lost. It is no longer a "family affair" with the close involvement of parents as an essential feature. Sometimes the use of a taxi or bus service to convey children tends to cut down frequent visits of parents to playcentre with a lessening of interest as a result.

There are many other ways of keeping in touch with your child's play as well as by supervising. If you wish, you may attend at any time to watch; you may bring your baby too, so long as you are responsible for him.

You can offer to wash dolls' clothes, mend equipment, or assist members of the committee with special jobs.

You can keep in touch, too, by reading newsletters and attending meetings of your centre.

DISCUSS ways you can make duty day –

(a) a chore
(b) a friendly and companionable event
(c) a learning time.

DISCUSS: "I'll soon have him off my hands." Does this attitude help your child to be independent?

DISCUSS: "Do you think playing with your child helps him to learn?

III. HELPING CHILDREN TO LEARN

Helping Your Child

If you accept happily your parent helping duties, you will convey this acceptance to your child and he will be glad to see you there helping and playing alongside him and other children. If you have attended with him during his first sessions and have taken part in play, the fact that you are helping the supervisor will make little difference to his behaviour. He may accept your new role quite casually, and, as is usual, be proud that you are part of the playcentre as he is.

If you think that he may be worried, it would be a good idea to tell him that you are going to help Mrs A (the Supervisor) and then answer all his questions quite sincerely and clearly.

His questions may be –

"Will you be able to play with me?" (Yes)
"Will you take me to the toilet?" (Yes)
"What will you do?" (Help Mrs A) etc.

If you have attended playcentre frequently you will not be anxious and he need not be upset because he is sharing his mother with other children.

Be careful, however, not to tell him that he must not bother you, or that you will not have time to talk to him or play with him. This would mean that you are becoming a different person, and would cause him to cling more closely to you. Therefore, set out from home together with the idea that both of you are going to have a specially pleasant and exciting time, and will have a lot to tell Daddy about when he comes home. Avoid a flurried rush if you possibly can.

A Child's "Behaviour"

A child's behaviour is often regarded as "good"if it fits in with what an adult likes, and "bad" if the adult finds it annoying or inconvenient.

In playcentre (or in any pre-school), it is considered that a child's behaviour, "good" or "bad" is the result of feelings caused by different kinds of treatment, by events or circumstances, or by his position in the family. Behaviour is a symptom of how he is feeling.

If a child's experiences were different, his behaviour would be different. If we wish him to be different, we have to consider carefully all the causes that lie behind his behaviour.

Children Are All Different

Our playcentre children are of many sorts of temperaments and physiques. Some are stolid and easy going, others are quick and alert. Others are different in other ways. We do not suggest that they could or should all behave the same way. But all playcentre children wish to become bigger and more able to cope with things, and learning through play helps them.

We know that some frustrations are inevitable in life, and that some restrictions are inevitable too. And some children need more help than others to be able to meet life and cope with it.

Let us look at some types of behaviour that need careful consideration in our playcentre work.

Aggressiveness

We know that play releases tensions.

We have all experienced the feeling of well-being and happiness when we are relieved from confining jobs.

Children feel the same but in an "all-over" way. They jump for joy, and shout and scream with excitement. These are happy feelings that they are releasing. But children have other feelings, just as grown ups do – such feelings as resentment or fear, and these, too, can be released through play.

Thus, when young children are playing freely with children of their own age, these feelings are sometimes released quite suddenly and violently, and we have aggressive, instead of friendly play.

We give these children vigorous play where they can work out their feelings without harm to anyone; cutting paper, pounding clay or dough, digging in sand or earth, hammering, chasing, playing with water, or again family play or block play.

We also try to replace hostile or fearful feelings with confident and tender ones. We may use suitable stories or encourage tenderness and protectiveness towards animals or younger children.

We are firm, but without anger or impatience. A resentful or fearful child may need constant help and careful supervision until he feels differently and acts differently.

Remember that this behaviour happens in all pre-school play groups, not just in yours. It is inevitable when children are learning to live together.

Conflict over possessions is usual. Sharing is something that follows security of possession and having rights of possession respected. We never expect a child to give up any object on which he has still a claim. We provide duplicates of many smaller items of equipment. Encroachment on play by another child will lead to immediate conflict, often without fear of consequences. Your mere presence will halt many of these conflicts. Let children handle the trouble themselves if possible, but if safety is involved, sometimes just walking towards them, or shaking your head, resolves the situation. If they cannot settle their quarrel, encourage them to talk it over with you. If you understand, explain each child to the other and put the case into words for them. If you cannot understand, say "I really cannot understand what the trouble is. We had better go and talk to Mrs A (the supervisor)".

If a child is hitting another child with a weapon you will not have time to do anything except act immediately. Go close to the child. Hold the hammer steadily and say firmly, "No, Bill. Hammers are for hitting nails (boards, boxes) not people".

If he persists, take the hammer away, but immediately settle him into another kind of play that will, if possible, be an outlet for his aggressiveness.

Never leave him with nothing satisfactory to do. Reassure him that you still like him (perhaps by playing with him for a while) but that you do not like his hurting others. Do not get fearful, angry, or upset, but accept aggressive behaviour as normal three or four year old behaviour.

Silliness and Showing Off is a kind of "as if" play and needs an audience. "I am a clown! Look at me." Try and get interest in an energetic make-believe project, taking part yourself.

Swearing, like showing off, is a frequent habit of the fours. They love new words, especially those that sound explosive or boastful. It need not be taken too seriously and could be ignored or treated casually.

Biting is a rapid attack with handy primitive weapons. It often results from fear, anxiety, perhaps hurt feelings, or even inability to share. The child is being driven by impulses that he cannot control. Separate the children gently but firmly, comfort any distress and help them to return happily to their play. It is often necessary to refer to the supervisor. (Never, of course, bite back.)

Hitting, like "bear hugging" is often meant to be a way of making friends; show children how to take hands, link arms or even have some "puppy" play.

Spitting may be a competitive way of showing off, or of being aggressive; provide an outlet as for aggressive play. It may mean the child is frightened.

Aimless running and shouting may occur among the older boys when they have too little to interest them. It is your chance to discover some topic or activity that will stimulate their play. Stay with them, listen to them, and talk to them.

Destructiveness sometimes results from lack of skill, but more often feelings of anger are transferred from a person or a situation to an object. Restrictions, frustrations, and denials are expressed violently by bashing, banging, throwing, shouting, name calling etc. Lead the child into one of the many types of play specially suited to energetic release of tensions (see aggressive play).

Understanding of Discipline

A playcentre is a workroom where learning is concrete and active; it depends on doing it yourself, rather than on being told what to do, and how long to take over it.

CHILDREN FREELY SELECT THEIR OWN PLAY.

Free play means freedom
- to choose an activity, and
- to take time to finish it,
- to choose friends and
- to share learning with others.

Licence is NOT permitted.

This includes
- actions that harm other children or adults,
- actions that *seriously disrupt* other children's play,
- wilful destruction or misuse of play equipment.

As Adults,
- we respect children as learners,
- we provide generously for their play,
- we help them to make friends,
- we suggest ways when things go wrong,
- we provide words and ideas and
- we look and listen while they play.

But we do NOT
- criticise or compare work,
- threaten or smack any child,
- or frown over mistakes.

CHILDREN, LIKE ADULTS, NEED EXPERIENCE IN LIVING AND WORKING TOGETHER.

Some ways that work with unco-operating children –

- Show affection and interest or give a cuddle.
- Help child to make friends with others; say his name to them.
- Show a child equipment and how to use it.
- Use humour and even absurdities to save "face".
- Hold child firmly and talk quietly to him.
- Suggest a fresh occupation.
- Walk towards group, shake head seriously.
- Direct action (e.g. in throwing sand) "Stop, at once," and then explain why.

Skilfully ignore to allow children to find their own solution.

- Rebellion is often resolved by permitting an action that obviously has unpleasant results for the performer. (There are, of course, limits to this method.)

All Children are Important

When you find you are responsible for other people's children, they become more important to you. You see them, as most teachers do, as real individuals, different from your own children, perhaps, but delightful and interesting, nevertheless. Because you are not so emotionally tied to them, you sometimes see them more clearly than you see your own children. You can watch them without a feeling of guilt.

DISCUSS: "Now is the best time to enjoy your children."
"Do girls differ from boys in their play?"
"Aggressiveness is natural to mankind."
"I find I can learn more easily than I did at school."

"A Job in Education"

A helper says, "We begin to realise after we have been helping for about a term what a wonderful job in education we are doing. We see that a child's education is as important at 3 or 4 years as it is at 13 and 14 years. It is a comfort to us as parents to know that our children are having the right start and that we are "in it" too. We learn so much without knowing it because it is all sensible and practical. It is good to make friends of other parents who have the same outlook and the same aged children. We can talk over things with the supervisor, who can often draw attention to qualities or talents in our children that we (being so close) have just not noticed".

* * * * * * * * * *

You will have read the other pamphlets and realised that these suggestions to guide you in the different duties of a voluntary assistant are not just arbitrary do's and don'ts, but are based on widely accepted ideas about children and play. We hope you find your days on duty rewarding to you and to your whole family, as well as of immense value to your special playcentre.

If you would like to read more about children, their play or their behaviour, inquire from the Information Officer or your Playcentre Supervisor.